RAOUL MIDDLEMAN

DRAWING ON DREAMS

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"When I work I have a feeling that Delacroix, Giotto, Tintoretto, El Greco, and the rest, as well as all the modern painters, the good and the bad, the abstract and the non-abstract, are all standing behind me watching me." [1]

Pablo Picasso, 1969

For years Raoul Middleman has painted outdoors and from the model, embracing nature and humanity, but while in seclusion to avoid infection he was deprived of both. And when all the museums were closed his favorite spiritual nourishment, viewing great painting, was denied him. But his mental horizon apparently expands when his physical horizon contracts: without nature to draw from, he draws his dreams.

Though a few artists have made drawing the medium of finished, detailed works, drawing often implies a certain urgency, the need to summarize something essential without unnecessary elaboration. Or drawing may be the artist's choice to develop a train of thought and follow an idea wherever it leads, however complex the result may become. Both characteristics sustain each other in the drawings in this exhibition.

The figure studies made by western artists since the Renaissance are good examples of urgent, experimental drawing. Often devoted to problems of design and accuracy in preparation for larger works in more stubborn media,

they can have a special intensity conferred by concise, forceful execution and concentration. The second kind of drawing, usually not aimed at realistic depiction, may be represented by the work of Paul Klee, in which a schematic representation refers to our experience of the world only indirectly. Instead of the appearance of an individual person or object the experiences Klee addressed are generalized concepts—poetry, music, legend—and his style presented them as poetic abstraction, rather like a map or textile.

Klee famously described drawing as taking a line for a walk, and one easily imagines Raoul Middleman's hand strolling over the sheet, trailing a leisurely, wandering line. But the result could not be more different than a drawing by Klee; rather than create a diagram, the tangle of lines resolves itself into an image that dreamily recalls the human figure, while also functioning as a metaphor for the dreaming process and affirming the physical reality of the work itself: the material presence of paper, ink, and paint, and the energy and skill with which they are deployed.

The dreams conjured by the line's meditative journey are often a carnival of nudes who cavort around, and in, the artist's head, like memories or thoughts; unlike the head, which often frowns in concentration or anger, these shameless sprites are usually cheerful and exuberant. Occasionally they are joined by the characters that modeled for the artist's colossal tableau paintings years ago, when his studio suggested a backstage party at a vaudeville theater. These drawings are the afterlife of this milieu, the product of his imagination in life and on paper.

The actors in this drama belong to the western tradition of drawing from the figure, whose humanism and classicism are both present here in a wry, updated style, like ancient myths enacted by a repertory company of guys and dolls. Though for centuries considered the foundation of an artist's skill, the ability to draw the figure may be considered dispensable now that imagery can be appropriated in so many ways. However, the ability to draw it from memory was always rare, because of the difficulty of internalizing complex forms.

Perhaps this inherent grasp of form may be likened to

the algorithms that reconstruct a three-dimensional image from two-dimensional scans, as in a CAT scan. In some artists the algorithm can operate on memory alone, allowing Rembrandt, for example, to draw figures in his etchings so small as to be hidden by his fingers. The memory of the form went directly to his hand.

Some such process enables Middleman to summarize the characters in his benign phantasmagoria, not by constructing them in the manner taught for centuries in academies, but by discovering them in his hand-woven skein of strolling lines. Sometimes the concrete existence of the artist is suggested by shading and highlighting his dreaming head, as his visions gamble around it. Despite the apparitions of borscht-belt babes the head occasionally dreams in a seventeenth-century Italian manner, as though it had been consorting with artists like Tintoretto, Magnasco, or Castiglione. A certain vibration, like tremulo on a string, distinguishes their drawing, in which contour emerges as a field of nervous energy that animates the twisting figures in their compositions. Centuries later this sensibility may be seen in the work of Corinth and Soutine, and now in Raoul Middleman's.

The focus on the self and fascination with one's own aging characterize some other distinguished late careers, foreign and domestic. Among American artists who concentrated on drawing themselves late in life one thinks of Ivan Albright, though his work was never humorous, and of the antic fatalism of Robert Beauchamp, which was. But the most fertile comparison must be to the late graphics of Picasso and the self-portraits of Rembrandt.

"When I work I have a feeling that Delacroix, Giotto, Tintoretto, El Greco, and the rest, as well as all the modern painters, the good and the bad, the abstract and the non-abstract, are all standing behind me watching me." This remark of Picasso is almost literally true. They stood behind him because his work was built on theirs, extending the same tradition. If we could not discern Raoul Middleman's bond with the artists of the past in his work, we know from his writing how vivid a presence they are in his working life. Though in much contemporary art, where

Raoul at work in his home studio during the pandemic.

the big bucks are often made by work based on digital and photographic media and mastering the human form may be considered negligible, he serenely continues the tradition of the masters, though his work is unquestionably modern.

Though artists' drawings of themselves are about time, in that they chronicle the aging of the artist, they are also timeless, because they erase the time that separates the artist from the viewer. In one drawing in this exhibition the artist has given himself features that resemble Rembrandt, history's greatest self-portraitist, in the pose of an artist painting. An exhibition of self-portraits can dramatize an autobiography with intensity, and this exhibition, despite its ribald high spirits, affords some of that poignancy. Meditating on his own experience of life the artist illuminates ours, dreaming and awake.

[1] Hélène Parmelin, *Picasso Says*. A. S. Barnes, South Brunswick NJ, 1969, 40.

VELÁZQUEZ AT THE PICCADILLY CLUB

RAOUL MIDDLEMAN

The Pandemic has shut down the museums and for the time being we've lost that kind of first-hand visceral experience we get looking at art. I already miss the oomph and goop of oil paint escaping from the pores of the canvas to be brushed, knifed, scraped, mixed, layered or smoothed out into tropes of sensual compliance.

Perhaps as a consequence of that dearth, I've lately been jolted from my sleep by images both sinister and absurd in their vaporous progression. Dreams are the fodder of my narrative drawings and gouaches as they morph into sagas of ambition, beauty and eccentricity—even vulgarity—for my sequestered amusement during the pandemic.

The confines of my studio are the presumptive stage for these oddities: floozies surrounded by a funky slew of sidekicks, barkers and the ever-lurking licentious monster of autrefois. Full of surprises; sometimes a stray racehorse will wander in with a blond girl jockey in the saddle. The occasional nervous gnome smokes in the wings. One sketch includes my meeting the Greek artist Aristodemus Kaldis. The unruly bohemian cad, espying me in the lobby of the Guggenheim, came swooping down the ramp at, as if on roller-skates, his proverbial red scarf fluttering in the wind, in a mad rush to tongue kiss the statuesque beauty alongside, who just happened to be my date at the time.

This series of menacing burlesques mixes memory and fantasy. They are records of the long hours spent in

Las Meninas (1656) by Diego Velázquez,
Museo del Prado, Madrid

interminable isolation, accomplished through multiple drawing sketches, watercolors and jam-packed gouaches.

I can no longer hire models, so everything must be made up. In a semiconscious state, I let my pen amble along at will. The imagery it comes up with is often chimerical and dreamlike.

A French poet, René Char, once said that he used to go to dreamland to escape from life, whereas now he goes there to live. One dream I had began with the jolly and rotund Dick Ireland, a dear friend and older colleague of mine at The Maryland Institute, as the main protagonist.

He was stationed conspicuously outside the marquee entrance of a Howard Street movie theater, fully attired in a cockamamie red outfit with gold broderie and a squarish hat with tiny bells. He was hoarse from barking out the latest feature film to all passersby. It was an art flick called "Manet."

Once seated in the movie theater, I was struck by the fact that the screen was almost totally dominated by the image of a humungous canvas, but only the back of it, with all its stretchers and cross braces in evidence. Along the left side however, squeezed into the narrow leftover corridor of space, an artist would appear sporadically, supposedly Édouard Manet. Only in the dream it was the swashbuckler Douglas Fairbanks, twirling fiendishly his moustache and brandishing a paintbrush with beaucoup of balderdash and brio, like a sword. But what was on the other side of this canvas remained a mystery. It could have been the bizarre flourish, mess and splatter leading to a discovery of a wholly new painterly approach, as in Manet's homage to Velázquez.

One could speculate that the large canvas that takes over the left-hand side of the peerless 1656 masterpiece, "Las Meninas" could be replete with the same kind of energy and gestures of painterly aplomb.

An uncanny compilation of fact and fiction, this painting is perhaps Velázquez's most idiosyncratic dream, a sly insubordinate dream of revenge against those who would keep him down as lowly craftsman of the mechanical art of painting, a mere flunky in service to the

Royal establishment.

This painting is full of non-sequiturs. Does the mirror on the back wall reflect what is painted on the canvas or the real life posing of the King and Queen? It's an ontological question that probes the subtle divide between fiction and reality. Taking place in the artist's studio at the Royal Alcázar with the King and Queen, the ostensible subject, on the model stand. But the real focus and center of the canvas is the five-year-old Infanta Margaret Theresa. The fresh and spontaneous brushwork of flesh, hair and garment makes for a miraculous glow of silver and gold.

The surrounding entourage includes, on either side of the Infanta, two curtseying ladies in waiting, plus a dwarf in drag and a midget whose foot stirs the slumbers of a sleeping mastiff—all approximately of the same height. Velázquez beside his canvas, towers above the phalanx with proud resolve. What all these attendees have in common is a lack of freedom to be other than what destiny has in store for them. All of them, even the Princess, are imprisoned from birth. On the other hand, the painter, as the emblem of a red cross on his chest testifies, is free to transcend his plebian origins (perhaps with even a smidgen of Jewish blood) to become a knight in the Order of Santiago.

Velázquez the painter now takes possession of the canvas. We, as viewers and stand-ins for the King and Queen, become witnesses to his existential ascendency. The subject of the painting, seemingly about the Royal family, now becomes all about celebrating the painter's induction into the Spanish aristocracy. Yet high up on the dimly lit walls are a proliferation of paintings by Titian, whose subject is dismemberment and hubris, that is, punishment for competing with the gods, which seems to make Velazquez's success ambivalent, to undercut his presumption. Sadly the last years of his life were spent more in performing duties for the King and overseeing the Royal Collection than in the actual painting of new pictures. Painting was the price Velázquez had to pay for his knighthood.

At first glance, nothing could be more incongruous than comparing a present day Baltimore artist in lockdown

in his condo on the 19th floor, drawing with a ballpoint pen zany reminiscences of Sammy Ross, a little person who was forced to dress as a leprechaun to amuse people, or Will Lacey, a ninety-year-old poet, celebrating the New Year at the Piccadilly nightclub by riding in diapers on a unicycle, to the highfalutin and sequestered splendors of the Spanish court.

It is this circumstance that I am especially drawn to in Las Meninas—much like in my sketches made during the pandemic—that takes place in the studio with the painter before the canvas with brush and palette in hand while being surrounded by a bunch of whacko onlookers.

In *The Critique of Judgment* the German philosopher Immanuel Kant attempted to rationalize aesthetic judgment. He concluded that great art cannot be reduced to a concept.

Now with no museums, no galleries, no critics to hobnob with, the practice of art conforms most to Kant's purposeless purpose, and freedom becomes pure galactic play.


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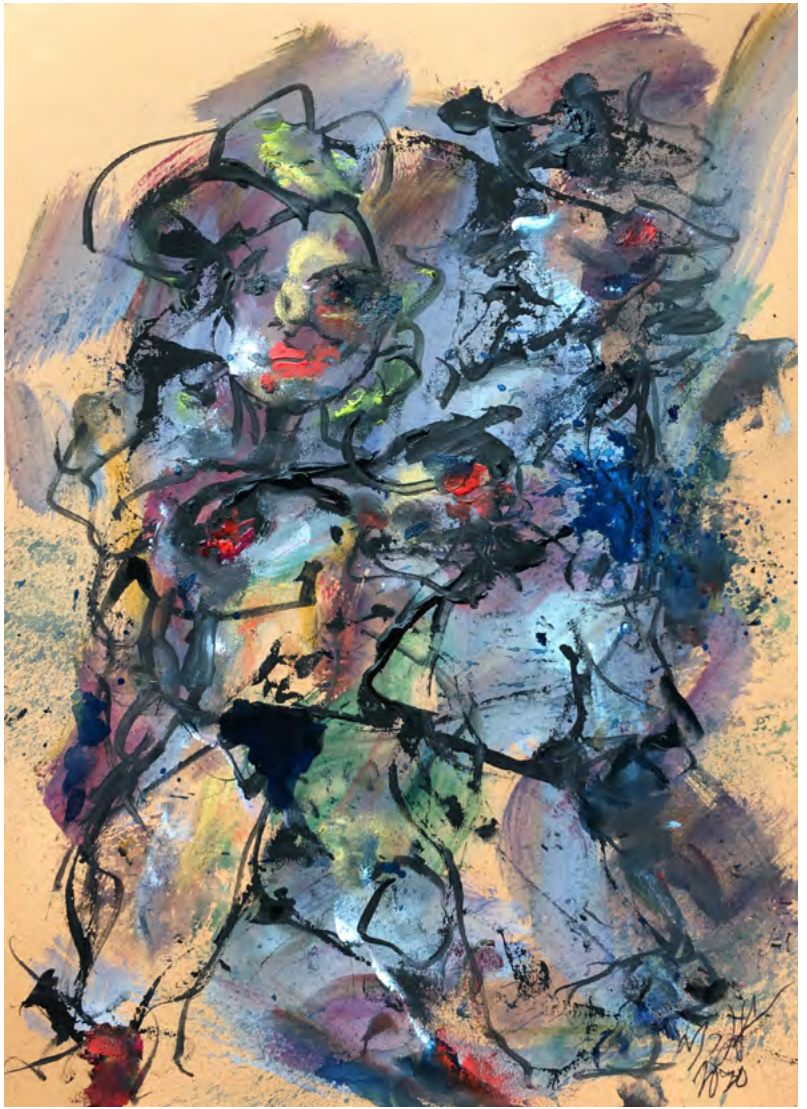

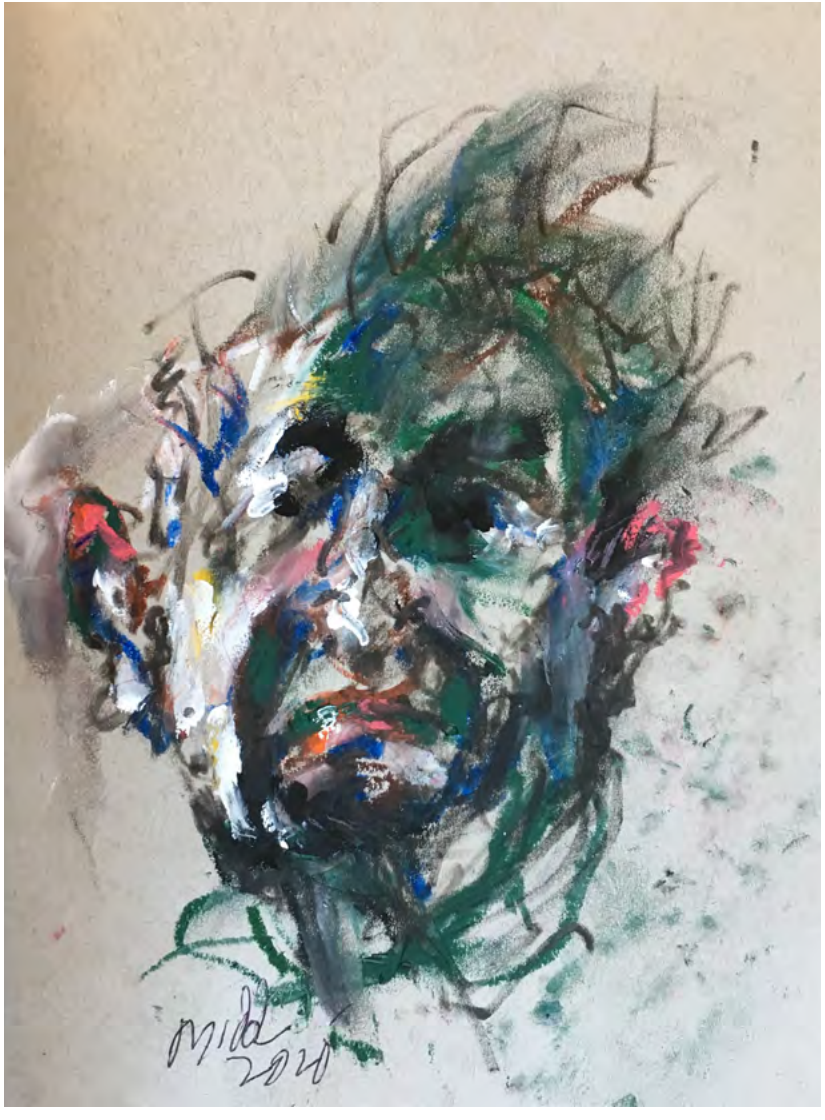


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INFORMATION

The drawings in this book are selections from sketchbooks filled by Raoul during the summer of the 2020 pandemic. Drawn with ink, wash, and opaque watercolor in pages ranging in size from 9”x12” at the smallest to 18”x24” at the largest.

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Edited by Ruth Channing

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